

Oz Harvest's Ronni Kahn on the unsaid power of permission in leadership | [Transcript](#)

Intro:

"Everything in the landscape that we did daily fundamentally shifted."

Right now one of the biggest concerns for leaders in the social sector is the wellbeing of their staff.

From Pro Bono News and Top Five Movement, this is the Leading Generous Teams podcast and I'm Clare Desira.

As the founder of the Top Five Movement, I've worked with thousands of leaders across 40 countries and I've seen how challenging it is to lead teams at the best of times, let alone right now.

COVID-19 has had a seismic impact on the social sector, and this is taking its toll on the people working in it.

So this show is dedicated to you, generous leaders who recognise that the resilience, mindset and mental health of your teams has never been more important.

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Clare Desira: Hello and welcome to another episode of Leading Generous Teams. Our guest today is the wonderful Ronni Kahn, food rescue activist and the CEO of OzHarvest. Thank you for joining us today, Ronni.

Ronni Kahn: Thank you so much. It is a real honour and a privilege to be chatting with you today.

Clare Desira: As Australia's leading food rescue charity, your team at OzHarvest collect quality surplus food and distribute it to people in need. And along the way, you of course divert that food waste from landfill as well. It's such an important role that your team play. That's where I'd love to kick off today. So with a growing team and over 1,000 volunteers, can you tell us a little bit about the impact of COVID on your work and your team?

Ronni Kahn: Absolutely. My goodness, what a year 2020 has been? We started with bushfires, which really kicked off the year and put us on the back foot somewhat, and I'll share why. And that is because the magnificent generosity that we as a nation and the globe showed towards the bushfires was just extraordinary. But what it meant was that there was huge donor fatigue after the bushfires.

And if you run an organisation that's fully philanthropic and whilst we amplified our services through bushfires, we certainly were not seen as an essential service during the bushfires. As in money wasn't being directed to us, which meant that January, February came, and we were wondering how this would impact our organisation.

I'm sharing with you very briefly that March for us is always a significant month. We hold a major event, which normally brings in around \$3 million. It's a face-to-face extraordinary event for around 2,000 people. COVID came mid-March and that event brings us in normally \$3 million. Of course, we had to cancel that event-

Clare Desira: Heartbreaking.

Ronni Kahn: ... and any other face-to-face initiatives of which we've been really good at creating beautiful experiential opportunities that also are revenue stream for us. And of course, that too fell by the wayside. In fact, it's interesting that we're being interviewed today because today it is six months to the day that we started working from home. It's been a powerful and extraordinary time because what it meant for us is that we had to pivot, redeploy, reconfigure, and really look at our business and what was important, what were the priorities, and how to rally and keep our staff engaged, employed, and involved and continuing the power of the work that we do. And so it was significant and has continued to be significant for us.

A significant number of our people have been redeployed into different roles to suit the changed needs of the business, because we really had to redefine what we do in the light of thousands of people losing their jobs and a new cohort of people needing food, and the existing cohort not being able to either leverage their previous avenues of getting food. Many of the charities we support closed down because they are manned by an older, more vulnerable population. So actually everything in the landscape that we did daily fundamentally shifted.

Clare Desira: Oh, they are just huge shifts. And as you've said, greater demand for your services at a time when your organisation is going through the greatest change that no doubt it has in over 15 years as well. So tell me, what have you done to help your staff's mindset and resilience and mental health during all of this change?

Ronni Kahn: The physical connection of hugs and smiles and meals together and hallway chats obviously have gone, but we've had to replace that really by video links, by Zoom, by all the technology that exists. And there have been extraordinary displays of resilience and we've adapted to change. For example, COVID has provided us different opportunities. And one of the things we've done is that from day one, for the first few weeks, every single day, I communicated out to the team, but over the last four or five months, that has now been myself and all the management team.

So every single day comes, goes out, in the late afternoon with full transparency around either things that we've experienced or things we want the team to know. So there's been a huge level of communication and connection, sharing special moments, sharing things we've read, sharing things we want everybody to know that we would normally share perhaps in passing at the water cooler.

Clare Desira: Yes, of course.

Ronni Kahn: There've been phone check ins, we all PNC, we're all phoning each other. There've been huddles. My management team, we used to meet weekly, and I'd meet individually with my management team once a week. We now for six months and ongoing, because it's just so precious, we have a huddle every single morning, a half-an-hour meeting to start the day just to check in and to share any different elements that might have happened over the previous 24 hours.

We've amplified our EAP services, connecting everybody, reminding everybody that there is an assistance program. They can talk to someone. Each individual team has also created their own huddles. We have fun engagement. We communicate on Slack and we've had team meetings increased. We've had funny engagements on Slack. There've been trivia nights and games and the teams have really... because socially within the OzHarvest family, people are friends. Not only do they work together, but they catch up on the weekends, they catch up at night. And so that has continued through all those various remote ways of doing it.

We do all-ins once every few weeks. And that is where we have maybe 100 of our team all come together, with me sharing something and then we'd either bring a special guest or we'd get someone in the business from any of our distant and remote venues, not just in headquarters, sharing something special, doing something, music, just sharing a beautiful and precious moment. So it's about staying connected and sharing with everybody that we are still one family, even if we're in different places and not necessarily in our offices.

Clare Desira: I love that. That community and connection lives on there at OzHarvest.

Ronni Kahn: Yeah, we are an incredibly connected and supportive organisation.

Clare Desira: Yes. I know you're well known for attracting and being a magnet for magnificent people. So I'm so pleased to hear you've been able to keep bringing people together and connecting in all of those really practical and important ways.

Ronni Kahn: Yeah, and we've still had to hire whilst we've redeployed because we put a freeze on hiring, but because we rolled out so many new programs, what I'm so proud of is the extraordinary way, the agile and nimble way that we innovated new programs and focused really all our efforts on food relief and food rescue because our other programs seem... Not that they were less relevant, but they were harder to deliver. So some of our education programs, but I'm also very proud to say that those teams very quickly got a handle on an online, digital presence and could roll out as well in this new format.

Clare Desira: So wonderful. Now, you're known as someone who doesn't like to take no for an answer and also someone that doesn't say no to anybody. I'd imagine that at times that takes a lot of resilience, especially during the change that we've been experiencing this year. Tell me, Ronni, how do you personally build and manage your own mental health and mindset?

Ronni Kahn: Thank you. It is so important. I will share with you that couple of weeks ago, I told the whole team, "I am taking a few days off because I just want to refresh, recalibrate." And I think that was so important because it gave everyone in my team permission because when I don't do that, they think they have to do what I do. And I do have a very high level of energy. I mean, we do know that and I'm blessed to have that. And it probably is intimidating for some at times, which is why that

notion of me saying I've got to take time out.

So I walk. I love to be in nature. I love to be around my children, my grandchildren. I do meditate. I do yoga. And I do that very early in the morning or later at night. But because it is just so important to have a balance and to make sure that my energy levels are being kept in balance, and that I can stay as resilient as I can, so I surround myself with the things that I love. And the people at work are one of those things and the people in my social circle in life are the other.

I love food. I got into cooking quite a lot, much more than I had cooked before. I got very complacent about food. Not because I don't love it and only want to eat healthy. I do. I'm very much a proponent of eating healthy, but I wasn't cooking as much and suddenly I found myself cooking and rediscovering the value of food. That's how I've managed to keep myself in balance. I've spent time with my son out of Sydney. So I've worked remotely in the exquisite environs of Byron in nature, which has been very beautiful.

Clare Desira: Beautiful. Ronni, I recently heard you speak and you said that COVID has allowed us space to really investigate who we are and what type of life we would like to lead. And that it's been a chance to tap into ourselves and come out with a sense of purpose so you can live that life fully. I know that purpose is really important for you and a driving force well and truly before, and I know it will be well and truly after this strange year. Can you tell us a little bit about the role of your purpose and how that also helps with your resilience?

Ronni Kahn: Absolutely. I think it is interesting, especially given that I have just finished my book, which gave me ample time to explore this whole notion of purpose, given that the book is called *A Repurposed Life*. I think that the most important thing that when you have meaning in your life, when there is something bigger than oneself, when one knows one is making a contribution in way, small or large, it adds a bigger reason to wake up every single day beyond our very own individual needs. And that's what allows us not to indulge in the "oh woe is me" because there's so much more to do.

And I think that there's no one in OzHarvest who doesn't know, and no one associated with OzHarvest, and not one of our volunteers or our stakeholders who doesn't know that our purpose is to nourish our country. And that is a huge driver. I mean, that is what keeps me excited every single day. How can we nourish our country? How do we do this? Are we still doing that? Are we doing it in the best way we can?

And so when you have that as your moral compass, your North Star, that notion of something that's bigger than yourself, I think it absolutely energises, enriches, and gives us a fuel that we didn't know that we would have if all we were thinking about is our very own lives and what we could do to enrich ourselves.

Clare Desira: I love it. Thank you. Any advice for the listeners on how they can, I guess, hear that inner voice and those answers inside around their own purpose beyond themselves, especially right now?

Ronni Kahn: Yeah. In a line I will absolutely give it, but really this isn't me trying to plug my book, but the truth is I spent the book trying to show that every single one of us can find that purpose inside of ourselves. It's not something you can go out and buy on a shelf and it would be so convenient if

it was, but every single one of us has the ability when we find something that brings us joy to do, it is within ourselves to find that purpose. And we don't have to go looking outside of us and we don't have to expect that it is only by doing huge or great or things of great scale outside of ourselves.

It can be just as simple as being kind to our neighbours, being thoughtful around some aspect of our lives, because they're in can we find bliss and joy and purpose within ourselves. But I certainly go into it in a much deeper way than I could have imagined obviously through my story. But yeah, in a nutshell, that's it. If they want to find more, have to read my book.

Clare Desira: I love it. Quite the teaser. I have pre-ordered my copy. I understand it comes out at the end of September 2020. So everybody, you can head over to Booktopia and pre-order A Repurposed Life.

Lastly, Ronni, tell me, what are your hopes for your team?

Ronni Kahn: The thing I hope most for my team is that they feel fulfilled, that they don't feel lonely and alienated, that they know that they are always part of a real family, whether they see them or they don't. That they all know that by contributing to the bigger picture of what OzHarvest does, whether it's from their home or whether they are one of those on the front line, that they are appreciated, and that the gratitude that they feel within is absolutely acknowledged because people are grateful for what we do. But we can only be filled with gratitude that we are in that position to give back to our society.

Clare Desira: Beautiful. Thank you so much for your time Ronni Kahn. And I really encourage people to learn out a little more, go and check out Ronni's movie called Food Fighter, which is available for our Australian listeners on iTunes. And of course, pre-order that book, and of course, head over to OzHarvest and find out how you can get involved and support all of the wonderful new look programs from Ronni and her team.

Ronni Kahn: Thank you so very, very much for the opportunity. It's always so important to reevaluate, rediscover, rethink recalibrate, and that's what happens in a conversation. So I really appreciate this.

Clare Desira: Ronni Kahn, what a woman? Now, it takes a lot of drive, resilience and grit to take on a huge issue and opportunity like food waste in our world. A quick glance over the OzHarvest website and there's some fascinating and heartbreaking and shocking stats. Like a third of the food that's produced in our world is lost or wasted. A third of the food. And they actually believe that there is enough food produced for everybody in the world, yet there are so many starving people. To be able to take an issue like that head on, it takes a lot of energy.

I wanted reflect today on some of the incredible points and insights that Ronni has left us with for those of us leading generous teams or for those with an interest in mindset, wellbeing, and resilience for themselves. There were so many gems from today.

The first standout one is around that listening, listening and communication with teams. And you could hear at all different levels, Ronni is really encouraging the communication and connection

within her team, whether it's phone check-ins, it's meeting directly with her management team, shifting from meeting weekly, to now meeting actually on a daily basis to keep each other in check and motivated and connected. And that's something that she said has been so valuable that she will continue even beyond this crazy year or time. And of course it doesn't just stop there. It's actually bringing people together right across the organisation for those full-team days where they're coming together to hear stories from each other, or hear stories and learn tools from external people as well. Just incredible.

All of the leaders that we've interviewed so far on the Leading Generous Teams podcast have all had this in common, all taking time, more time than they ever have to be able to communicate, support, and connect with their teams. And I think that they are absolutely on to something as well.

The second point that Ronni shared that I wanted to talk about was around transparency and sharing all of the information that they have with their team. These of course saves a lot of gossiping and speculating. And in our experience, it saves a lot of people from jumping at shadows. We want information when we're going through change. And so this can give us that feeling or that element of control. And it also, when we don't have the answers, it can also be a really wonderfully brave, but also wonderful trust-building exercise to share what it is that we don't know as well with our teams. And it sounds like that's absolutely happening over at OzHarvest.

Another tip and tool that I loved of course, was around amplifying the messages around EAP programs or employee assistance programs. This is something we've spoken about before. For those of you that aren't familiar with this, it's when an organisation pays for mental health services for their staff so employees can go and access those services. They're often encouraged in a crisis time, but more often now they're really being positioned as a huge opportunity. And if you want to learn more about these programs and tapping into proactive mental health support, then go and check back and check out our first bonus episode where we talk about this huge untapped opportunity for us to be building our mental health and resilience, no matter where we're sitting on the mental health scale. Now, whether we're in crisis mode, or whether we're coping, how can we actually learn new strategies to be able to really support ourselves to thrive and have the biggest impact that we can?

A really important message that Ronni left us with was around permission as well and giving herself permission to take some time off. By doing this, it absolutely sent a loud and clear message to the rest of her team. And I don't know if you've ever come across or seen Ronni before, but she is fiercely unstoppable. She is absolutely a machine, she's very high energy as she mentioned. And so it can be easy for people to think that she can just keep on going. So it's a really important message for her to be able to share she needs time off to recharge and recalibrate too.

During her time off, you could hear Ronni sharing things like she's spending time with family and walking and getting out in nature, meditating, spending time with her loved ones and those in her circles, and also getting lost in some hobbies. Revisiting the beautiful art of creativity in cooking. And she's a living breathing model or example of someone who's living and leaning into a positive psychology model for happiness and wellbeing, which is called PERMA.

This model suggests that there are five core elements for us to be happy and to have that sustainable wellbeing. They're things like positive emotion, engagement, relationships, connection, meaning and accomplishment. And so that's around setting goals and achieving things, whether that's to have

a routine during this crazy time of change or whether it is to actually have a hobby where you're actually working towards something.

Now, there's so much in that model. I'd really love to park that there, but to explore it again in more detail in our one of our bonus episodes. But if when you picture someone like Ronni and the joy that she just exudes and the drive that she has, it's no wonder to me that she has some of these pillars in place that are really supporting that and supporting her to show up in that way.

And of course, lastly, she's fiercely clear on her purpose. This is something we'd love to talk and share some more ideas with you in another episode as well. We're often asked by people around, how can we understand what our purpose is and to move into more purposeful work, like many of our listeners that are actually already in? And so we'll expand on that later. And in the meantime, you might like to check out Ronni's book, which is out very soon that's called A Repurposed Life.

As we close today, I'd really love to leave maybe with a few reflection questions. The first is, how are you communicating with your teams and are you carving out that space to be with them, to support them without an agenda sometimes, but just to actually be there as well? All of our leaders have mentioned that this is something that is core at the moment to supporting their teams. So we definitely recommend it. We love to say slowing down to go faster. And it's about getting off that busy-ness treadmill and just being as present as you possibly can.

The second question is, are you being as transparent as you can with your teams? Ronni is a great example of how transparent they're being at OzHarvest. And I guess it's a chance for you to reflect on, are there things that you know you could share with your team? Are there things that you don't know that you could also share with your team that you don't know the answers to, but they're things that you are actually curious about or that you are looking for direction on to? That can be an incredible way to build trust as I mentioned, but also to support your team in a really easy way.

Lastly, are you role modelling the permission to have rest, self-care, and proactive look after your own mindset and mental health. By giving yourself permission, you're therefore creating that flow on effect of unsaid permission to those in your team around you. It can be a really powerful way for someone to lead right now.

Lastly, if when you're bringing your teams together and you're wondering what to present to them, or you're looking for some new tools around mindset, resilience, and wellbeing, then we'd be so happy to come in and have a chat with them to share some ideas as well. It's something that we're doing almost on a daily basis at the moment. So we'd love to be able to support your organisation in that way. If we can, please just reach out and let's have a chat about that.

Lastly, of course, a huge thank you again to Ronni Kahn. What a force. Please follow, support, and explore OzHarvest's work. It is incredibly generous and absolutely needed.

Thank you so much. We'll speak with you soon.

Clare Desira: As we wrap, I want to say a big thank you to all of the generous leaders and their teams out there, making a difference in our world, especially right now.

I'd like to say thank you to the people of the Kulin nation, from the Country where this podcast is produced, and of course I want to say thank you to you, our listeners.

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And for now, we're wishing you the strongest mental health mindset and resilience as you head into the rest of your day. Have a good one.

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